

THE REVIVALS.

A

D I S C O U R S E

DELIVERD IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

IN

PHILADELPHIA

ON

SUNDAY APRIL 11th 1858

BY

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PHILADELPHIA

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DISCOURSE.

MATTH. XIII. 31.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED, WHICH A MAN TOOK, AND SOWED IN HIS FIELD.

I SELECT these words now, not with the intention of discoursing upon them particularly, but merely because they afford an instance of what I think may be regarded as a favorite method of the great Teacher's in illustrating the truths which he inculcated. I refer to his habit of elucidating moral principles by the analogies of the natural world. He was a faithful observer of Nature, and in the methods and processes of Nature he saw expressive symbols of the spiritual and invisible. At one time he compares religion to the material light, "Let your light so shine." Again he likens the influence of truth to the air, or rather to the wind. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, thou hearest the sound thereof, but thou canst

not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit." Or he represents truth as a small seed that, being sown in the ground, grows to become a great plant, bearing fruit; "first the blade, then the ear, after that, the full corn in the ear." He likens the teacher to a sower. Then again he calls himself a vine and his disciples the branches. Indeed it may be said that the teachings of Christ are clothed throughout in language taken from the objects and operations of the natural world. All Nature seems to have been to him as the hieroglyphics in which the laws and qualities of the spiritual world are written and described. As then we would learn the methods and properties of true Religion and how the religious character is formed and grows, we are taught by the way in which, on numerous occasions, Christ expressed himself, to study what is going on in the natural world around us. One and the same wise and benignant Being is at work there and here. And both without and within, his working is in the same inimitable style and is marked by the same characteristics.

The train of thought which is thus suggested has a peculiar interest at this juncture for more reasons than one. One of the great periodical changes in the natural world, the season of Spring, is approaching.

Its coming is announced by the soft south wind, by the willows, the first to array themselves in summer robes of green, by brighter light and warmer suns and lengthened days, and by the birds, those airy, graceful little heralds, piping a welcome to the Spring and telling in music of the coming of genial heats and of bright and fragrant flowers.

We have just passed through a winter of almost unexampled mildness, none the less grateful for mitigating the effects of the great commercial calamity, which, throwing so many people out of employment, threatened an appalling state of distress. In the moderate temperature of the winter months what an expressive token have we had of the Merciful Power that tempers the wind to the shorn lamb! But whether our winters be long or short, severe or mild, when was Spring otherwise than welcome? When was it other than the festal season, the holiday of the year? Its visible beauty, the delicate and glossy green which it spreads over all the fields, and hangs in graceful wreaths on all the trees, its snowy blossoms and its heaps of flowers, its softness and its songs—the mere sight and sound of its loveliness and melody—these alone suffice to gladden the hearts of men.

But the Spring time is still more impressive in its spiritual significance. A God-given illustration is it, again repeated, of the world within. It is the language (if we only have the sense to understand it !) in which the Creator tells us how it is with the soul,—how the growth of that proceeds. Spring is beautiful in itself. But it is much more beautiful as a type of a more vital and greater change in the interior being of man. It shows us how, when the long winter of moral ignorance and sin passes away—how Truth comes to vivify the buried seeds of good in the heart, and to animate our best affections.

The spiritual import of the Spring is no fanciful thought. It is a reality existing in the very nature of things. For, as I have already reminded you, there is a resemblance, one to another, in all the ways and methods of the Divine Power, in the world without and the world within. It is through this resemblance that we discern that God is one. Everywhere we see one and the same Being. And by studying the manner of the divine operation in external Nature we may catch some hints of how it is in the heart of man ; hints the more valuable, because we are liable to mistake the fancies of our own minds, the workings of our own blind passions, for the operations of the holy spirit of God.

And this brings me to mention as another reason why we should observe the way of the Divine working in the natural world, the excitement, which, under the name of a Revival of Religion, has now for some time been going on over a large part of the country, and which is regarded by thousands as the working of the Holy Spirit; a change in men's minds and characters as real and thorough as the physical change now beginning all around us; a revival of the soul, like the revival of the earth in Spring time, and produced by the same Power. So it is very widely accounted.

My friends, I have not the slightest disposition to speak lightly, without due consideration, of the honest religious convictions of a single human being on earth. But I am bound in honesty to say that I cannot recognize in this movement the operation of the selfsame Spirit which is now beginning to breathe in the balm and to glow in the light and the beauty of the reviving year. On the contrary it looks to me like a spasmodic effort of the old religious way of thinking, to recover the hold which, through the rapid progress of things, it has been so steadily losing for the last half century upon the minds of men.

You all know that since the world began there has never been, within so short a space of time, such wonderful progress made, such mighty forces subdued to the service of man, inventions of such extraordi-

nary skill and of such extensive use. And the effect of it all has been to multiply and expand the ideas of men to an unheard-of degree. It lies in the nature of the case that, when men find themselves in new and broader relations to one another, and to all things, their religious thinking must take a corresponding largeness and breadth, and the old ways of religious thought must be outgrown. And accordingly, as we all see and know, multitudes of intelligent men pay them only a formal respect. It is becoming a rare thing to find a man who seriously avows his belief in the dogmas of orthodoxy. Indeed, these doctrines have ceased in a great measure to be preached even. The old religious forms and phrases still continue. They are still standing. Once they were full of sap—full of leaves, and fruit. They suited the times and circumstances—the atmosphere in which they first sprang up, and that atmosphere suited them. But of late years all the life there was in them has been dying out. They have been growing more and more dry and barren.

And now we have in this revival as it is called, an endeavor to awaken the old spirit—to carry out again the old notion of Religion, which represents the service of God as consisting mainly in praying and singing, in attendance upon religious meetings, and in

feeling good, making religion a matter of supreme selfishness, an appeal to selfish fears and selfish hopes, giving men to think that sin is to be avoided, not first and chiefly for its own hateful sake, but because of the everlasting fire hereafter, and that Christ is to be loved and served not on his own account, but for the white robes and heavenly harps and golden crowns to be bestowed upon the righteous after death. This is the essential error of the Religion so long and so widely prevalent: it conveys the impression that there is something more to be dreaded than doing wrong, something more to be desired than obedience.

Now, for my own part, I see in this excitement only a stage in the history of the orthodox religion; an excitement, which at the best will only end just where it began. Happy will it be, if, like all other paroxysms wasting the religious feeling of this generation, it be not followed by a wide and deplorable deadness, as has so often proved to be the case with revivals, popularly so called. That the present "awakening" is accompanied by some improvement in the personal habits of those who are affected by it; that many may be led to forsake vicious courses, to abstain from criminal self-indulgence, I am not at all disposed to question. This is the very least

that it could do. There is hardly any form of Religion in the world which, when a man is impressed by it, would not move him to do as much as this. Yet even here the reality of a moral change, not religious emotion, but only time can certify. But while some personal sin is corrected, while some vices are abolished, other hateful vices are apt to appear in their stead: spiritual pride and censoriousness; and as it has been wisely said, what men gain by self-denial, they lose by self-conceit. What an offensive manifestation of this weakness, to give it its gentlest name, have we had in the prayer meetings which have been held in Boston, (in Boston which claims to be the most enlightened of our cities,) prayer meetings for the conversion or the confusion of Theodore Parker. The idea! Why, it is the rankest spiritual arrogance that was ever gendered in the heart of man. Theodore Parker may have his errors. Who on earth has not? I do not believe in his theology, but I do say that in a brave Apostolic devotion to the great cause of God and Humanity, he is an example to every Christian and to every clergyman in the land. When they who are praying that he may be converted or silenced, resemble him at all in his fidelity to God and his brother man, then they may make some claim

to being converted themselves, and never before, though they attend religious meetings and pray there every hour of the day and every day of the year.

But independently of the immediate good or evil effects of this religious excitement, I discern in it simply a re-awakening of the old way of thinking which magnifies formal praying, praising God with psalms and hymns, and frequent religious gatherings. It is only serving up, with the attraction of novel places and times, of week days and theatres, the old beggarly elements, a re-hash of the old innutritious husks.

It is true, it is claimed for this excitement, that it is unattended with any violence or extravagance, and that it is remarkably free from sectarianism. It is curious, by the way, to observe how some people talk about not being sectarian. They talk about it just as, till within a short time, we all talked about the freedom of this country. Nothing was more common than the assertion—you could hear it every where, in pulpits, on the fourth of July, and in all sorts of public addresses; I have made it myself doubtless in times past, to my shame: namely, that here in this country every man is free. This we all affirmed without qualification, for we really believed it. We actually and utterly forgot that there

were some millions on our soil in a condition of bondage as abject as the world ever saw! So of certain religious denominations among us. If they unite in any movement with two or three other denominations from whom they differ very slightly at the most, then they proclaim that the movement is free from all sectarianism. They seem absolutely to forget the other denominations that do not unite in it. Thus in the case of this revival so called, the claim is made for it, that it has nothing sectarian in it, and yet it is confined almost exclusively to two or three of the principal sects, sects that scarcely differ from one another. The Roman Catholics, the Friends, the unorthodox denominations, are entirely lost sight of.

But after all, be this as it may, there is no doubt that this excitement is chastened and liberalized in some degree in conformity to the light of the times. The very fact that those who approve of it, who encourage it, who hold it to be a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, claim for it that it is unaccompanied by any extravagance, that it is sober and subdued, and free from all narrowness and sectarianism, shows that people are getting some inkling of the truth, that they are beginning to understand that the influence of Religion is not violent, extravagant, and that its spirit must be liberal. This is almost the only sign of

progress which the movement shows. Apart from this, it is a revival not of true Religion, but, I repeat, of the old mistaken idea that verbal prayer and psalm-singing, and religious meetings and ebullitions of religious emotion, groans of distress and cries of glory, constitute the chief part of the service of God ; the old idea, that allows its converts to pursue unre-buked the making of money, and to practice every art within the law to secure a pecuniary advantage, and to grind into the dust the unfortunate and the poor ; the old idea which taught men to stickle at social parties and dancing and the opera, while, scrupulous and religious in these matters, they were permitted to ignore Justice and Mercy, to live on, utterly heedless of the wrongs and agonies of millions of slaves, not only permitted, but encouraged, taught, by learned ministers and professors of this most orthodox faith to silence every appeal, made to them for the weak against the mighty, under the miserable plea that it is confounding Religion with politics !

Now, my friends, as I solemnly believe, as I cannot help believing, that it is impossible and absurd to think of serving God while we are despising and oppressing our fellow-man, or countenancing others in despising and oppressing him, as this is my assured faith, how can I look with any satisfaction or hope

upon a revival of that Religion which passes by the most sacred claims of Humanity, and allows men to believe that they can be accepted of God when they are trampling down into the dust his sacred image in the person of the slave? Such a religion is a pretence, an undisguised mockery before God, a gross fraud put upon man, teaching him to put the form for the life, the letter that kills, for the spirit that gives life. Instead of welcoming the revival of such a religion, I pray that God, in his mercy, may bury it deep beyond the possibility of a resurrection. We have tried it long, and it has so depraved and seared the conscience of the whole nation that, with all their wealth of intellectual power and activity, this people are blind to the supremacy of simple justice and insist upon building the fabric of their prosperity upon a gross violation of the Eternal Law of God.

I see in this movement no extraordinary manifestation of a spirit of Humanity. I do not see that the awakened consciences of these great gatherings are appalled at the guilt which we have incurred through the monstrous wrong which we are doing to our oppressed brother. It is true, applications have been made in some of the meetings, by fugitives from slavery for the prayers of all Christian people. But in one large meeting in New York such an applica-

tion was rejected, and other petitions of like character for prayer to God that the fugitive might escape into security and freedom, have not been very warmly received. Even Henry Ward Beecher, loyal as he is to the right, while he read a note asking prayers for a poor fugitive slave-woman, yet seems to have felt that it was somewhat out of place to read it in one of those great meetings. I saw with pleasure, however, that in one Methodist meeting, a note of this kind was sent up and promptly read, and the fugitive was fervently prayed for, and when the prayer was ended, all the people shouted *Amen*.

Still, pleasing as such instances are, there is no decisive evidence of the awakening of those sacred sentiments of Humanity which, here in this land, familiarity with Injustice and Oppression, and the powerful influence of unrighteous laws, have thrown into such a long and death-like sleep. It is only the revival in men's minds of those old religious impressions of the importance of certain forms, impressions, made on them in tender childhood and youth. I do not hear that any new and grander views of duty are opening upon men's minds—that they have caught any new vision of Righteousness and Mercy. Still there is the same old talk of religious duty apart from daily duty, as if God could not be served as

acceptably—indeed even more acceptably in the shop or the counting room than in the Conference or Prayer meeting, as if a man might not show his religious principles more significantly even, in the making of a bargain than in the singing of a psalm. There is the same mystic phraseology, about the atonement and blood of Christ, the same confounding of emotions that are transient with principles that should be eternally active. This revival too undertakes to transact the great business of a change of character with the dispatch which marks all the proceedings of this American people. I do not question that an impression may be made upon the mind by a single word, in a flash, in an instant of time, an impression of the most lasting character. But then again we all know the magnetic influence of a large number of human beings crowded together on one spot, and how that influence will overpower and carry an individual away, almost against his reason. Music helps powerfully as a conductor of this mighty magnetism, even the simplest hymn, if the words or only the tune comes to us like a voice from our early childhood when we heard it sung in reverence and love by parents and friends long since past away. Can we not see plainly what is in great part the attraction of these large meetings,

and what it is that is taken for a thorough and radical change of heart? It is the revival of early impressions. It is the delight one feels in the indulgence of sensibility, in feeling good, which, is a very different thing from being good and doing good. One of the favorite hymns at the revival meetings is Dr. Watts's:

When I can read my title clear
 To mansions in the skies,
 I bid farewell to every fear,
 And dry my weeping eyes.

The second verse of this hymn reads thus :

Should earth against my peace engage,
 And hellish darts be hurl'd,
 Then could I smile at Satan's rage,
 And face a frowning world.

How many, think you, who sing these words and with the utmost fervor, and who believe themselves converted, with a clear title to heavenly mansions,— how many are ready to smile at the world's rage and face its frown? How many are prepared, or dream of preparing themselves, to risk property and popularity and life even, for righteousness' sake? They are ready enough to attend prayer meetings and pray and sing, but the world does not rage against them or frown upon them for doing these things. All this is very easy to do, a great deal easier than

to stay at home and discharge one's home duties and bear our daily burthens, never impatient, never ill-tempered, always living in communion with the Highest and Best, always maintaining the right in every company and at all hazards, and thus making every act an offering of praise and prayer. The religion, of whose revival we are now hearing so much, is the popular world's religion, the religion, whose greatest sacrifices consist in rigidly abstaining from certain innocent social pleasures.

Now you may depend upon it, friends, that a revival of true Religion would present very different appearances. It would not be dispatched with quite so much ease. It would show itself not in conformity with popular ideas but in opposition to them. It is now some five and twenty years since there commenced in this country a true Revival, a Revival of the Religion not of Calvin or of Wesley, but of the New Testament, the Religion of Jesus Christ, the Religion that places the worship of God in the Love of Man, in fidelity to the claims of the weak and the wronged, the Religion that acknowledges no enactments of man as of greater authority than the two great Commandments of God and of Christ, the Religion, the proof of conversion to which is a willingness to speak and act and suffer for Righteousness' sake. Twenty-five

years has this great Revival been going on, and still the leaders in this, *the most profoundly religious movement of the country and the age*, have been and still are to this hour denied all claim to be regarded as religious men, denounced as infidels, as the enemies of Christianity, as political agitators aiming to stir up wrath and violence. Still they work on in patience and in faith, willing, if they may only be faithful, to endure to their graves the reproach which in every age of the world has been cast upon those, who have sought to turn men from the worship of the dead letter, to the inspiration of the living and lifegiving Spirit. If they called the Master of the household Beelzebub, how can his servants expect to fare any better!

It has been precisely so in every real revival of Religion from that grandest of all Revivals which took place under Jesus and his Apostles. In all these instances men were converted, *not to a popular, but to an unpopular Religion*, and their conversion was at the peril of position, of property, of personal liberty and life. Then dungeons were prepared and scaffolds and stakes were planted and faggots gathered, and crosses erected for the converts, who went straight from the baptism of water to the baptism of blood and fire for the sake of the defamed and persecuted

truth, the truth which comes down from the holy heavens and from the bosom of God to preach glad tidings to the outcast poor, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. Any religion that ignores this truth, that neglects these offices, any religion that does not inspire its converts to confront and defy human opposition, does not deserve the name, and when it is dying out, ought to be buried forever, never again revived.

But what a true revival is, we might learn from what is going on before our eyes in the world of external nature. There how gently, how without noise, or display, with no spasms but with a silent and steady energy, from the smallest grain, in every particle of sap, does the Holy Spirit of God renew the face of the earth ! There is no sudden and violent action ; we talk of the break of day, but there is no break. The morning light steals imperceptibly over sky and earth and the darkness of night melts softly away. So also is the coming of Spring ; and so too is the path of the just, the advent of Truth into the soul. Not in a moment and by one convulsive throe is the winter displaced and the Spring seated in her robes of green on her throne of flowers. Neither is

it in any such way that the soul is brought to the knowledge and service of Divine Truth. The light of truth dawns, the warmth and life of human sympathy and love breathe upon the heart and revive all its languid affections, and the hidden germs of good begin to swell, and as the wind blows where it will and we cannot tell whence it comes and whither it goes, so is every one that is born of the Spirit. O ! dear friends, open your hearts to the generous and life-giving warmth of that Divine Humanity which was incarnated in Christ. Behold ! he stands without and knocks. Open to him, I beseech you, or rather to his poor, wounded, bleeding and wronged brothers whom he sends to us, a great multitude, in his stead. Admit them, admit them all, there is room for them in your hearts. Turn your eyes full upon the claims of your brother. Attend to the voiceless anguish of those who are crushed now under the weight of our inhumanity. And in the blessed work of laboring for them, before we are aware of it, the long cold winter of our hardness will have passed away and we shall find all around us a new heaven and a new earth, the Spring time of the eternal year of the Lord.

